ODYSSEY:
ten years of
a good whole life
in my own home

Andrew Bloomfield
2008

Dedicated to all my friends,
past and present,
near and far...

To mark ten years in my own home, I am writing about the main milestones on my life journey. It is an instalment of "my story" or personal "his-tory." It continues from *About Myself*, in which our friend Lucie Milne told of our life to 1997. I have also shared my thoughts and poetry about many topics in my book *In My Mind* (2006).

Odyssey is a good word image for my story. Odyssey means a long adventurous journey, with perils and anxieties as well as pleasures and discoveries. I haven't traveled far in the past ten years, but my life has been a pioneering process of development that is like faraway travel. While we can set a course, or a destination, for our journey, there will be surprises. It is wise to be flexible and open to unexpected discoveries. We may know generally where we are going and what the key values and qualities must be. But exactly how everything will happen we cannot know. We must allow for what Elizabeth calls serendipity. If we are too focused on just one way of getting to our goal, we may not see the other possibilities we had not expected and which may turn out better. It is like finding something wonderful around the corner on a winding road.

Odyssey has another meaning for me. Odysseus, also called Ulysses, led a voyage of discovery long ago around the Mediterranean Sea, which was recorded in an epic poem called *The Odyssey* by Homer. Ulysses told his men to keep him from temptations when he might not make wise decisions. This story has inspired the "Ulysses clause" in supported decision-making which I use to make choices of all kinds. In times when I am feeling fine and clear-headed, I can make "in-case" decisions for the hard times when I cannot easily express myself. I can tell my trusted friends what I want to happen in particular circumstances or emergencies when I may be unable to communicate it.

1997

1996 and 1997 were key years in shaping my present good life. They were also very hard, as we missed Vickie so much, and it was tough to adjust to other changes too.

Planning for a good life in my community

Vickie and I had started to do this together. After she died in February 1996, it became even more important to plan how I could eventually learn to depend less on my parents. With them and my friends, we talked a great deal about the most important things for a good life. One meeting was at Spirit Valley Farm on Victoria Day in May 1996. I said my goal is to "try my best to be a good man" and that the most important things are:

- A home of my own, spacious and quiet and shared with people I choose
- Communicating my way, so people know I'm smart
- Regular structure of real work, learning and exercise
- Friends who understand, believe in and help me.

We wrote about all these in a book called *Planning with Andrew* that we printed at the very end of 1996. My friend Monica made a video about my life around the same time, *Portrait of Andrew as a Young Man.*

We told the Government what I wanted and needed, and asked for individualized funds so that I could make choices and control my own life. The Government was slow to accept these new ideas, so we were on our own, especially for the next two years.

A home of my own

After a year of planning with my family and friends about how I wanted to live, we decided to invest in a home for me. We looked for a spacious house in a neighbourhood that offered plenty of scope for walking. We chose a large house with three levels, so that I could have some options

in choosing people who could share my home. We took possession on 25 June 1997. For the first month or so, I would visit my home every day, to get used to it, and to plan and work on whatever needed doing. My dog Zach and I started sleeping there in early August, and I have slept there every night since then. Elizabeth has camped in the house all these years as my anchor homesharer, to keep my home and life running smoothly.

We had a special Open House on 6 July, with many friends attending to wish me well. As the house had no furniture, people brought their lawn chairs. Friends who came to my home that first time included Monica C and her parents; Jane, Dave and Monica D (who took her first steps in my living-room that day which was also her first birthday); Henk and Inge; Marie and her family; and Claire with her sons Daniel and Konrad. Neighbours around my new home were welcoming. Friends in the Geography Department took up a collection to help me buy Crate Design furniture for my new bedroom. Monica C gave me a longterm loan of her piano (made in Guelph by the Bell company in the 1880s) which we have had restored, as well as a sofa and table for my Relaxation Room.

Guelph Services for the Autistic, the non-profit charitable corporation our family helped to found in 1980, offered to take on the important functions of a housing trust, to guarantee that I could live in my home as long as I wanted and needed. Various friends have served on the GSA Board since 1997--including Henk and Inge Ensing, Fred Dahms, Strath Davis, Dave DeVidi, Andrew Foster, John Verhart, Amar Arneja and Ted McCartney.

Other good people and experiences came into my life:

- Teresa became my full-time tutor for two years until June 1999. As we shared a good deal of time, we did many activities together. With my parents, she helped me to settle into my new home and garden.

- With Teresa, I learned to copy-type on the computer, doing some really big jobs as a volunteer. One was the motor vehicle maintenance schedule for the Credit Valley Conservation Authority; another was a biblio-graphic list of John Baillargeon's library about autism. I also typed a Logic article for my friend Dave. Teresa introduced me to poetry. We went to the library, pottery and yoga classes. She also drove me to Mr Ensing's shop, to make steel cleats for airconditioning installations, and we went on field trips. We visited Crawford Lake and Teresa's brothers' farms in Oxford County.
- We made some progress with my health, discovering that my body cannot tolerate some foodstuffs or any medications; so my diet was changed from March 1997 to exclude wheat, milk, potatoes and some other items. As I lived all the time with my parents, they could observe the ups and downs in my health and moods, as a basis for making improvements.
- I often met with Brenda of Brantford who helped me with various kinds of relaxation therapy.
- Starting in 1996, my father and I, with Andrew Foster and my mother sometimes, and of course my dog Zach, worked to trim and tidy the conifers and undergrowth in the Spirit Valley woods. This was already one of my favourite places associated with Vickie and FC, and I have continued to enjoy work there.
- I started to go swimming at the University pool one or two evenings in most weeks with John and Kim, and this continued for several years.
- My friend Marie came to my house one evening a week for several years to share jigsaw puzzles.
- Andrew Foster started to build a new model railway in part of my downstairs studio.

1998

- Much work was done on my house in 1997-8, to create the downstairs apartment, upgrade electrics and plumbing, and fill in the large, deep swimming pool at the back and naturalize it with ponds, waterfall and bog garden.
- On February 11, we made formal agreements with GSA; they mean that I can live safely at 23 Waverly for as long as I like, providing I and my parents can pay for everything.
- In the late winter/early spring, my health had a serious setback: it seemed as if my nerves and muscles went on strike for ten weeks in a very scary way. While we asked medical people for help, nobody could explain it, but ten years later we think it might have been the onset of Autistic Catatonia. Since then I have had times of being very frozen and stuck (a bit like Parkinson's) and times of being very hyperactive, sleepless, impulsive and uninhibited (rather like Tourette's), with some calm intervals of only a week or so at a time. At the end of these ten weeks, I had the first of the grand mal seizures that have continued on average every 3-4 months since.
- I went to Hillside Festival for the first time in July. For several years, Amy and I went, usually in the company of John and other friends. I loved the whole experience, but by about 2006, the festival got so large that it lost some qualities I liked most.
- Over the spring and summer, my family and friends worked very hard to get me individualized funding. People who helped by speaking up for me and attending meetings included Linda, Fred, Dave, Claire and John, with my parents. When we could not get any real help locally, it was wonderful that Malcolm of Windsor worked with Elizabeth on all the procedures to get my individualized funds flowed to me, through his agency from October.

- I was chosen as Block Captain of Neighbourhood Watch, and have continued for ten years. I was asked because I walk about our neighbourhood so regularly.
- With Elizabeth and Gerry, I developed routines in looking after myself, my home and garden. It takes a while to get accustomed to a new house, but once I learn a skill, I never forget it. Even when I am not very well, I can usually do familiar tasks. Tasks I can always do in my home include laundry, drying dishes and putting away clean things from the dishwasher, making my bed and tidying my room, opening up the house each morning, and looking after the garbage. I feed my dogs and let them out; and I can walk two dogs together. In the garden, I am a dab hand with shears, saws and wheelbarrows.
- My friend Lucie Milne wrote the story of my life up to 1997, which we printed as *About Myself: Portrait of Andrew who has Autism* in December.

What I love about Hillside Festival

In my mind, the Hillside Festival is music and atmosphere. I like to think that Hillside is an experience that is always with me. It is atmosphere and all the music and all the people that make it so. I think the experience is about making something musical and exciting happen there. I feel a part of something alive there and it is like I can be a part of the music. People like me there and accept me. I want to thank them all. I want to go forever as long as it happens. I think Hillside is special because it is only one yearly. It is not possible to recreate it. Out of doors makes it easier to deal with so many people.

1999

- Early in the year, we had some consultations with Ellen Yack in Toronto about my sensory system. We started the "Wilbarger protocol" with deep brushing of my arms, legs and back and joint compression. At first, I had this very often, then we gradually reduced the frequency. Now we usually do it once a day, first thing in the morning with some brain gym.
- We also had advice from Louise Hopkins and Elizabeth Bell and bought various things to help my sensory integration, especially weighted blankets. When I feel my senses may be out of sync, I sign to my friends that I want to lie down under the weighted blanket—usually in my Relaxation Room where I also have calming music.
- On June 30, we had a support group meeting with Martha, on the theme of Listening to Andrew. As one result, Dave wrote to the Ontario College of speech pathologists saying that surely everyone has a right to be supported in the form of communication that works for them. So the college agreed that everyone should know it is permitted for speech language pathologists to consult to people like me who need and use supported typing.
- Teresa who had been my full-time tutor for nearly two years, moved on to train as a teacher. Later, she returned to teach in Guelph and now lives with her family in my neighbourhood. Teresa had done so much for me and then was careful in preparing me for the big change when she left. Since Teresa, we have found several part-time people to share support of my good life. It's good for all of us to have variety and balance.
- I met Heidi who later became my part-time tutor from 2000 and has been my loyal friend and creative companion in so many activities ever since. I love Heidi. It is so nice to have her in my life. I do

want her to know that I appreciate her. I like her healing energy, her commitment to me, and the interesting things we do in learning and art.

- I met Catharine who has been giving me Reflexology treatments every fortnight since then.
- I greatly enjoyed art therapy with Shawna in fall 1999 and winter 2000.
- On November 8, Amy joined my household as a properly trained service dog from National Service Dogs. Born 15 March 1998, she is beautiful, clever and loving--my dear companion and friendmaker. The *Guelph Mercury* ran a story about us on 17 November 1999. Steven helped us during 2000 as Amy's "postgrad" trainer. It was good that Amy joined us then, as dear Zach who had been with us since May 1991 died the following June.

Amy is my friendmaker

She is so cute and friendly, and people who might be nervous about talking to me are drawn to her. It's not like with guide dogs you mustn't talk to.

Amy is in my plan because I need companionship and she holds me to the path. She goes everywhere I go. We have a special card saying we are a licensed Public Access Team. She walks the streets with me and goes on buses and even trains. I think she bridges the gap between me and the rest of the world. She alerts me to the presence of others and her appearance makes others want to interact with me. Looking after her makes me stay more aware of traffic and hazards on my way. Holding on to Amy helps my sense of balance and makes me more comfortable in new or strange situations.

With Amy, I can have more independence and dignity, and need not be supervised all the time by other people. She stays with me all the time. I feed her and look after her. She knows my signs and sounds, and my moods. She barks when someone she does not know comes to the door. She can also call people if I need help.

2000

- From January, Martha visited several times to be videotaped with me for *Listening to Andrew*, which we produced later in the year.
- *Listening to Andrew* also includes segments of Beth explaining how she facilitates people to express themselves. Beth's first visit to my home in March was an example of serendipity. It was not really intended to be about communication, but more telling us how she helped find and train support workers for adults with autism in Toronto. Beth and I had known each other in the 1980s, before either of us encountered FC (or supported typing as we call it now). But when she visited, she asked me if she could support me to type. I had nobody helping with FC then except my parents.
- In my first conversation with Beth, I said: *I bet you can help me... to be more communicative."* And that is how it has been for the past eight years. In our first year, I said a good deal about how much FC means to me. In our third conversation, I remarked: *"I'm really glad that I'm at a level of competency with you. You really do well as an FCer [facilitator]. I like that you are humble... You kind of treat us like very nice friends."*
- Kirsty was my tutor for two days a week from September to April and then part-time homesharer as well in summer 2001. It was like having a sister again.
- We planted trees to remember Vickie. They are both native to our region. In the University Arboretum, we dedicated a red maple (Acer rubrum "Tilford") and in Riverside Park East we planted a red oak (Quercus rubra). Our neighbourhood walks often take us past the oak, around which we also planted daffodils and narcissus.

What everyone yearns for: Really good support to communicate

Until FC, I did not know I thought in words. Just was absorbing. Yes, I know I have thoughts and I can talk. Lots to tell you. Now you have really got me going again. My communication is driving on.

When Beth was showing new friends how to provide support, I asked her: *Try to tell them that a really good facilitators tries to feel everything that I feel. I hope they really get it. We really need to get more people to talk to. Just let them watch us. You tell them that you do the supporting, I do the moving, pointing, spelling. To FC with me, you need to believe in me. I want to teach more people. I need to know in advance that new people will be practising with me. I know that I am experienced at FC but need to be patient with new people. You should tell them that I need to have as much emotional support as physical support.*

The thing everyone yearns for is really good support to communicate. In my mind, FC is the most important exercise I get—for my mind and hands, and also exercising my right to be heard. I want to be able to talk with more friends so that they are really listening to me. FC is more important than ever. Someone in my circle needs to FC with me when we have meetings.

Communicating....

...is opening your mind to let others inside to know you and what you think and believe and feel. It is as if the more I communicate the more I think.

... makes me feel like a door opens so the world can understand me and I have a chance to be in the world. I mean out in the world as I am who I am. Before Supported Typing, I had ways that were just for basic needs or pointing to something. That was not always reliable. I want to tell my friends to say how good I feel when I can say what is in my mind.

2001

- In January, John Lord led my friends in thinking how to make my good life better. Various friends had good ideas that have kept going ever since. I was cheered by their positive thoughts.
- The first new activity was working regularly with Kaitlin in the barn and with the horses at Spirit Valley, which I have kept up, with support from her whole family. I really love this place and its people.
- Thanks to the Fosters, I also became associated with Westminster-St Paul's Presbyterian Church, where I have sometimes volunteered.
- Susan, a student in Applied Human Nutrition at the University, visited my home weekly for three months, to plan, cook and enjoy eating meals.
- We developed my front garden to be naturalized, green and sound-buffering and the back garden to have ponds, waterfall and raised beds for vegetables and herbs, as well as areas of native plants that are good for the environment and for bees, butterflies, beneficial bugs and special birds.
- With Heidi, I started to share Amy with the seniors at The Elliott nursing home.
- I got to know Heather for a year. She was a very bright student of Genetics, who came as a volunteer friend to my home most Tuesday evenings, to share games, music and dinner, usually with Elizabeth, Gerry and Heidi, and occasionally others.
- Our friends the Arnejas came to live in Guelph; we visited each others' homes and Ranju has shared most of my Thursday afternoons with Heidi.
- My friends listened to my wish to continue learning and also to become more fluent on the computer by getting WriteOutloud software for me through our friend Claire. This has been wonderful for me ever since. Unless I am ill and frozen in my hands, I like to use this software on my studio computer for 2-3 hours at a stretch. I learn about all sorts of topics—

my favourites are the environment and how we can save it, the brain and what's different about autism, and spirituality and beauty. I learn through reading the text, typing it, and then hearing the software speak back to me what I have typed. Jan helped me to improve my typing skills.

- Following all the ideas we had planned, and our practice with Kirsty during the summer, we invited Luiza from Brazil to be a live-in caregiver in my home. We she could be an anchor homesharer, but it was hard for her to get the balance between encouraging me to do all I can for myself and protecting me in the hard times. She pitied me and could not see my abilities. She was also keen to experience North American culture. We tried really hard to make it work, but in the end we had to ask her to move on.

Qualities of supporters

I need upbeat and gentle people around me, not gushing. It might irritate me, when someone does not treat me like an adult, more like kindergarten. I welcome new people as long as they do not look down on me because I do not speak. I need homesharers and friends who listen to and understand me; I need more people to talk with me.

Their life philosophies and lifestyles matter. My supporters should be interested in the environment, so the house will be run by people who care like me. I want loving people. Spirituality is essential. In my mind loving people is loving God. I want to be able to teach but not be a guinea pig. I like to think I can inspire others.

I think it is important that they devote time to getting to know me and my needs. Balance--knowing when to encourage and when to support... I want to feel that the people in my house are here for me, not just because the rent is cheap. I need to be central to the house.

2002

- In February, we incorporated FAB: Friends of Andrew Bloomfield, my Aroha of personal empowerment and support. Dave, Honeyman and Teresa agreed to be directors with Gerry, Elizabeth and myself. We had learned about "Microboards" at a conference we organized in November 2001 at the University of Guelph. We call FAB an Aroha which is an Aotearoa/New Zealand Maori word with rich meanings to suit my situation. Families and friends of vulnerable people keep asking our advice about forming an Aroha and how to create a home of one's own. The first person to follow my example was a man in Peterborough whose mother and friends visited us in September 2002.
- I met Dr Joan Jory for the first time in March; and she has consulted about my health ever since. With her advice, I take various vitamin and mineral micronutrients to make up for the foods I cannot eat. I have been a pioneer: we have had to try lots of things to discover what is most helpful. Following Joan's advice, my sleep patterns have improved and so has my digestion. While I still have hard times in my health, I can type to describe how I feel and what helps, and people listen.
- We improved my home with a new ensuite bathroom and soundproofing in my bedroom, and "smart" electronic systems to make me more independent and responsible.
- We started a rose garden to remember the women in our families who had died since 1995—my grandmother Bloomfield, my sister Vickie, "Marama" (my other grandmother) and Ruth (Elizabeth's sister)--
- We had some meetings of my circle of friends, led by Judith McGill, about the roles of anchor homesharers. We keep looking for the right people. Some friends have been companion homesharers, like Kirsty in 2001 and Stacey in 2003.

- During the year, we talked with a new transfer payment agency in our region. An agreement became effective in October, so my individualized funds can be spent on what works for me, with all the good features of the first agreement with Windsor.
- By a happy accident in September, Elizabeth met Sunny who had just arrived from South Korea with her new husband. Above all, Sunny wanted to meet Canadian people with autism and also to become a really good music therapist. So we got to know her well. She has been a very special person in my life. Because she wanted to help me express my inner thoughts, I started to compose these in poetry, with Beth's help too. Sunny put her heart and soul into setting four of my poems to music. I bought a drum and cymbals to use with my piano and Sunny's guitar. Though Sunny is now living again in South Korea, our time together will always be with me.
- I delivered the Guelph Tribune to 36 neighbours twice a week for a year from November. I loved doing this so they could see me being useful.

Music with Sunny

The music is good,
It is good for my soul.
The creating,
The release of ideas and feelings,
and hearing the music.
I do like the drum and cymbals.
No right or wrong,
just feeling it and doing it.
I like the completing
of the musical thought,
I like the finishing better.
I like the songs Sunny sings.
I like to listen to them later.

2003

- New electronic security and independence features were installed in my house. It's becoming quite a show house for others. I like to know that I am helping others to improve their lives. I like the front door access system and using my own key card. I like the idea of taking charge of myself. It is good to think of ways technology can help to run my home reliably. The new therapy light (full spectrum) helped in some ways with my mood and spirits.
- We started a co-op food buying club called Waverly Foodways from April, so we can get supplies of the organic and natural foods I need for my diet. In December we published my first cookbook.
- Elizabeth was away three days at a conference in Kingston telling people about my home and good life, and I composed a message for her to take.
- My Hillside experience was very good this July: I met the Mayor of Guelph and typed eloquently about what I like about Guelph and caring for our environment.
- Stacey was my companion homesharer over the summer, and we did many great things together like swimming in a neighbour's pool, crocheting a blanket for Sunny's baby, walking and riding the bus, playing the piano. She was here for the 30 hours we were without electricity because of the "great power outage" which was really hard for me.
- In fall, I began exercise at GoodLife gym with Minerva. Nearly five years later, Minerva still takes great care of my muscles. She is a nice person. I like working with her because she is very patient and encouraging. She plans exercise activities just for me—I like the way she works around my body's challenges. I feel she helps me get strong. It seems to relax me afterwards.
- I went running and biking with my friend Dave through this academic season; he also played

card games and tried to teach me chess. Dave is a special person in my life as president of FAB; he also helps GSA with special projects.

- We went on various steam train trips in the fall—once inviting my friends Ranju and Jonathan too.
- We visited David's farm at Gilford for first time in October. David is a very special person who writes me wonderful letters. He has helped me, by suggesting that I listen to my body and take breaks and even naps when I need them.

Counting my blessings

People should know what a wonderful home I have and the things I do every day. I have my own home and it revolves around me. I know everyone who comes here is friendly to me. I'm sorry more people can't have this. I have this because my parents are good advocates and they got me individual funds to help.

I am comfortable and safe in my home. It is a friendly neighbourhood. I have gotten out a lot and they see me and I deliver the Tribune. I like to greet people when they greet me. I try to smile. Amy is my friendmaker. I love to walk with her. I have space for different things--like art, the computer and exercise, and my room is private. There is an apartment in the basement and three rooms upstairs and many bathrooms. My garden is heaven on earth. I like my bathroom sensor. It is a good idea and my alarm on the bedroom door if I need to get help. If I need help I can open the door.

I'm happy with our progress. Well planned and not stressful. I grow into each step. I like to be a pioneer but it is too slow and scary sometimes. I might get the wrong people. I have lots of good people in my life. I think the conference people may want to know if I am interested in interviewing people to support me. Yes, it is most important that I get a say.

2004

- To celebrate the new year, we hosted a group of FC friends on 4 January—they came by train from Toronto too! The first group of communicators was the core of what is now Bridges Over Barriers. New friends, John, Ken, and Kevin with their families started in May, and John from Detroit in August.
- In January, I also hosted a FAB dinner party for other friends, including Jane, Dave, Monica, Teresa, Linda, Andrew, Honeyman, Kaitlin, John, Heidi and Kim. We used the whole livingroom, and Gerry planned an "entertainment" in the downstairs studio of slide images that link my life with their lives.
- In March, we made train and ferry trips to Toronto Island on a very cold beautiful day.
- We made various efforts to get Methylcobalamin into my body, before we found that transdermal cream in emu oil is best. We also worked out the other micronutrients which I need, with pure cod liver oil.
- Sunny had her baby Daniel in January and visited quite often with him on Thursday afternoons when Heidi and Ranju were also here. Sunny introduced us to Gyung-mi and her boys and they continued to visit often through 2005 and much of 2006. When Sunny moved to Toronto, we made a trip there in December 2004 when we rode the subway with her and little Daniel, and walked the whole length of Roncevalles Avenue.
- Aquafit classes with Minerva and Daniel in late winter and spring. A new elliptical training machine was installed at home, and from mid-June I began to do fitness exercises with Minerva at my home.
- From May, I got to know Laurie who is dependable and strong and kind. After a time of getting to know each other, we formed a pattern of her coming in the early evening to support me through dinner and the end of day routines.

- In the winter I took pottery classes with Heidi. I made mosaic paving stones with Heidi and want to make more. My friends give me small objects that have some meaning for them, and we set these in concrete in special moulds. I can make these as gifts, and also as stepping-stones for my garden.
- We started to talk with other families about farm community and cohousing ideas. We showed the video about Bittersweet Farms which Vickie and I had visited in 1995, and hosted two workshops in November.
- Terrific experience of Hillside Festival this year, with friends John and Joanne.
- With Andrew Foster, I wrote an article for *The Presbyterian Record*.
- I was shocked and upset when Elizabeth broke her leg in September, and Gerry was away in England. But I tried my best to look after her.

Thinking about disabilities

I learned that my NZ artist friend Bryan had lost his eyesight. I thought how hard that must be. I know that people can be disabled in various ways--sight, hearing, physical – paralyzed hands and legs, movement like Parkinsons. I think mental illness too and DH. MS, MD, CP too. AIDS is in Africa and some here too

Autism is a disability and also a way of life.

How do I think people in the community think about people with disabilities? Sad. Curious, Helpful. Different people have different thoughts. I think they feel bad for us. I identify with other adults who have autism, but they are not friends unless I have got to know them well like I know my Bridges friends.

2005

- Peter made a cabinet for my Relaxation Room in which to display the rock specimens which my friends bring back from other parts of the world. Minerva has brought back rocks from Spain and Portugal, as well as Florida and Cuba; the Verharts from Florida, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Bancroft; Monica C from Iowa and British Columbia; Roberta from Alberta; Mary J from Parry Sound and Alaska; Monica D from Lake Huron beaches; Dave and Jane from Saskatchewan; the Moons from the Bahamas, Russia and Estonia; the Fosters from Iona in Scotland, high parts of New Jersey and New York State, and Lake Huron.
- We started to help at the Ignatius Jesuit Centre, especially in the Courtyard garden, and enjoyed hiking in the extensive grounds.
- Roberta became my friend, especially for cooking, volunteering at my church with the bulletins, and with dental care.
- Mandeep supported me for some weeks during the summer with exercise, the computer and cooking.
- I took a train trip with Andrew Foster and E from Orangeville to Brampton in August while G was away in England.
- November was the first hard month of trying some new micronutrient supplements, but this was followed by three good winter months.
- From June, I thought and dreamed with Beth and Elizabeth about how to help our communication group to grow. We chose the name of Bridges over Barriers for our vision. In November, I asked the directors of GSA, of which I am an active member, to be trustee for money that friends and family might give for Bridges. People have been very generous, and gifts to Bridges amounted to more than $20,000 in the next two years.

Bridges Over Barriers vision

Our gatherings are so important that I want to start a place of refuge and organization for communication and life planning. I want to see more training for people to communicate. I am dreaming of a place where we can come together, to be together, to communicate together. I am dreaming of a place, where I can be a leader and a friend, a person who helps and a person who needs help.

This is my idea: I want to be in a place where I can greet friends, host meetings, teach about communication and other things that help us. For now, it can be based in my home. Later it must be bigger. This is so happy-making. First the Gathering and then the world. I am really serious about this!

We do not have to live together, but some of us might like to live closer. We would welcome people who use supported typing and other communication strategies. It is about building bridges, not walls. I want to share this dream as I think we have become important to each other in a powerful way. I think that our FC gatherings can be made more regular and frequent. We can talk more often online or email. We can teach others. I want to share my dream.

This is how I describe Bridges in asking people to support us: Bridges over Barriers is a centre for friends and family who share the challenges of autism to come together to share support, ideas and community. Bridges is the beginning of an idea for us to build on a small community of adults with autism who have been meeting a few times a year since January 2004. We have been developing our skills as communicators and sharing technology ideas and friendship.

I want to tell people that I love Bridges.
It gives me a focus and centre of interest,
a cause that is important because
I believe in myself and my friends.
The spiritual connection between us is hard to describe.
I know I feel it. It is family and godly.
I do think we get ideas from each other.
Who knows where it begins, and where it ends?

2006

- Teresa and Travis moved into my neighbourhood. I enjoyed their visits and some biking with Travis.
- I starred with Amy in an article about "dogs with jobs" in a new magazine for vets.
- We composed special messages to help the campaign to protect Ignatius lands from Wal-Mart commercial development. My thoughts about Ignatius helped in appealing to the Courts under the Charter of Canadian Rights and Freedoms.
- I hosted Tim's circle of friends on February 24, during the process of his family moving to live in our region. In early April, during the move, Tim spent a night and parts of two days with me, so his family could get the new house ready for him.
- We hosted seven gatherings and produced two newsletters for Bridges Over Barriers.
- On May 7, I invited my FAB friends to a garden party to celebrate spring, and had various activity areas inside and out to show parts of my life: a garden game, Minerva's fitness tests, my computer and WriteOutloud software.
- We worked a great deal in the Ignatius Courtyard, and volunteered for Loyola House and Wildlife Preservation Trust of Canada.
- With Roberta or E, I volunteered for my church.
- For nearly a year, Gerry was a co-investigator in the Locating Technology Project, based at McMaster University. It was partly inspired by my need and wish to move about my community independently, and we tested a Columba device for several weeks.
- We visited David's farm in July, and took photos. David stayed two nights with us in November.
- For Christmas, we published my new book *In My Mind: Thoughts and Words of Andrew Bloomfield, 2000-2006.* Friends sent messages to me from around the world.

A place of peace

I come to Ignatius to have time with friends, to meet in a quiet place that is not disturbed by cars and crowds. I work in the Courtyard and I am calm because of the quiet peace. I'm in a special place of God and nature and history. I know there is Jesuit history and native history there.

Many of my friends are autistic and so am I. It means we are sensitive to noise and nervous at times with crowds of people. Lights, traffic and pollution are problems we have to deal with every day. But at Ignatius we have a sanctuary.

Reviews of In My Mind

From Gillian in England: *Powerful poems, Andrew. You continue to amaze people by your deep insight into the intangible realities of the soul. Not only that, but your ability to communicate right through the immense barriers in expressing thought and feeling. If only we could find the formula for unlocking the prison door and releasing the full and complete you into a liberating freedom. To understand and be understood. It would appear your first poem "What it's like to be me" speaks of restlessness, a struggle for freedom, a sort of feeling of being trapped, a yearning for release. Your time-bomb waiting to explode speaks of a yearning for liberation. And your tear waiting to fall—is that of sadness or joy? Joy with liberation of explosion. Very profound and meaningful.*

From Raghida in Jordan: *I am so amazed by what I read. I always automatically look at special people behind their faces, into their inner selves, and I always see how perfect they are. Andrew, you are affirming this to me. Thank you so much for your words, thank you for your efforts. God loves you enormously, you are so special, you are so blessed.*

From Lauren in Tennessee: *I was emotionally moved both by your concepts of the meaning of spiritual matters and your expressions of your need to connect to, and to be understood by others through your poetry. One never knows how lives touch other lives. I am grateful that you have touched mine.*

2007

- Daniela was a perfect part-time carer in my home for six months, until she got a new full-time job. We practised some of what it would be like to have a live-in caregiver or homesharer. Sometimes I need encouragement to do everything I can for myself but I also need my support people to be sensitive and flexible when I feel frozen or hyper.
- In late March, my dietitian friend Joan and my doctor Chris visited my home at the same time to meet me and talk about my health. We hoped I could let my blood be drawn for analysis to tell people more about my body and system. But I always panicked and could not give blood. Instead, Elizabeth keeps records of all my health indicators.
- Tim's grandfather died in April, at the age of 100, and friends made gifts to Bridges in his honour.
- I hosted several Bridges gatherings during the year. One was a Painting Party to celebrate Spring. We had another special gathering in May, to meet Rodney and his entourage from Australia—members of a group called the Brotherhood of the Wordless.
- I wrote an essay called "What everyone yearns for: really good support to communicate." You can read it in the Bridges Over Barriers Newsletter 4.
- August marked the 10th anniversary of moving into my own home. I am so glad to be in my own home. It helped me to grow in ways I cannot explain completely. I feel proud and grown up and not impeded by others.
- In October, I began to enjoy Horticultural Therapy with my new friend Lea, whom I met in the summer when she was HT for the Guelph Enabling Garden.
- A new dog joined my household on November 2. Madison (Madi for short) was nearly 2 with a very different personality from Amy's. She has lots of energy and is very physical, liking to snuggle up to me, but is not yet perfectly adjusted to home life.

We asked Minerva to help us to train Madi to be a good companion for me.

- Gerry's father, my Grandad, died on 13 December aged 96, after being ill for about a year, when Gerry visited him several times to set up home care. His last three weeks were in a very caring hospice. I had thought he would live for ever. Our friends comforted me with their thoughts, telling me that my Grandad had given me his own brave spirit to help me on my life's journey. Gerry composed a memoir of Grandad, with some photos.
- Late in the year, we completed the guide for others that is based on my experience of the past ten years. We are sharing *Creating a Home and Good Life of My Own* with people and families all over Canada who are interested in following my example.
- In December, I met Brian who is a Music Therapist. In the new year, he has begun to visit for regular sessions. As I do not speak, Brian has learned about me and autism from my poetry. Brian has set some more of my poems to music. He lends me different kinds of music so I can tell what I like. He also asked me to be choir librarian for the new Spark of Harmony choir that he leads.

My thoughts about gardens

I like the summer except when the air is hard to breathe.
I like the fun and freedom. I like Lea. I think she is kind.
I think the Enabling Garden has good energy feelings.
I like to walk there every day because it is lovely to look at.
I like the structure of paths and walkways, as it very hard for me to stand still and keep my balance.
I need to keep moving, and the paths and hedges keep me anchored, as Amy does too.
I am drawn to the water's edge naturally.
I like gardens because they are peaceful to walk in.
My perfect garden would have the green leaves of plants and the colours of flowers, but I don't much like the red.
I like the fragrances of gardens. Nothing bothers me there.

2008

- This year I celebrate 11 years in my home as well as my 40th birthday. February marked ten years since GSA formally agreed with me to support me in my own home for as long as I want and need. We started a Guest Book then, for the next ten years. People visiting my home can write their names, how long they have known me, and a message if they like.
- 2008 has begun pretty well in my health and spirits. March and April have been perfect. I dare to think we are getting the right balance now in the various micronutrients I need to keep healthy. It helps that I listen to my body. Being ill is absolutely terrible in how I feel, and also because other people find it so hard to see the real me.

My body betrays me
Bodies please us, but not always,
when we need them to move or sleep or talk.
Not always with movement,
in ways I want to count on,
am I able to be content with my body.

I tempt fate if I say I am well, because like the weather,
it could change to a tornado in a moment.
Rushing over me, wind and hailstorm,
my body swirling and moving,
and not stopping for a breath.

- My ten-year odyssey has brought me to a good place. I have my own home, loving and devoted parents who believe in my abilities, wonderful friends and supporters, and interesting activities. I am proud to care for my dogs and my home and garden. I try my best to be a good man. I want all the good things in my life to continue, but we still need to journey on.

- We still need to find or create some more strategies that can keep my good life going when my parents no longer can. I have clear ideas of the qualities I need in support people, especially the lifesharers who may share my home. We are waiting for serendipity, turns in the road, that will lead us to such supportive friends.
- My vision for Bridges is also a work-in-progress. I am passionate about this—both for myself and also for others who are misunderstood and put down because they cannot speak with their voices.

My Strengths

I think my strengths are in
my willingness to try new things.
I like to host people in my home.
I have a lot to say and I am good at it.
I do nice things for others.
I am interested in the world,
close to home and far away.
I like to work for my neighbourhood and community
and important issues in Canada.
I care about the environment and the world's people.

I like to say things straight unless in a poem.
I rely on my friends to be upbeat and focused.
My friends look to me to be kind, wise and,
when I can, to be upbeat too.
For Bridges, I invite people to gather together
so I am like a facilitator.
I like to lead but
I need to figure out things about myself first.
I have learned that my community needs pretty much
what I need too.
The people in my life get joy from my happiness.
Some of my friends see me as their teacher about
autism, diet, movement and communication.
I have learned to do many things
which I like to share with them.

Bibliography

A Portrait of Andrew as a young man (video of my life and plan, produced by Monica Carsience), 1997.

About Myself: Portrait of Andrew who has autism (by Lucie Milne with the Bloomfield family), 1998, revised edition 2003.

Listening to Andrew (video about how I communicate, also featuring Martha Leary, Elizabeth Bell and Beth Komito-Gottlieb), 2000.

"Loving people is loving God: Autism and spirituality," (article with Andrew Foster in *The Presbyterian Record)*, May 2005.

"I am host in my home... I am whole and have hope," (article by Elizabeth, published in Autism Ontario manual, *Living with ASD: adolescence and beyond*, pp. 257-266), 2006.

In My Mind: Thoughts and Words of Andrew Bloomfield, 2000-2006, 2006.

Visit the Bridges Over Barriers webpage, with links to Bridges newsletters, at:
http://www.ont-autism.uoguelph.ca/Bridges-2007.html

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

If you would like to contribute to the vision of Bridges Over Barriers, please send your gift (payable to "Guelph Services for the Autistic", with Bridges on the memo line) to:
GSA Treasurer (Bridges)
16 Caribou Cr, Guelph, ON, Canada, N1E 1C9
Gifts of $25 or more qualify for official tax-creditable receipts in Canada.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~